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RETHINKING PARTICIPATORY EMPOWERMENT, GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT: The PRA Approach

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Introduction

The failure of development efforts to either ameliorate or eliminate poverty in much of the South has inspired numerous critiques of established development practice. In the 1960s and 70s, dependency scholars blamed the South's underdevelopment on the North (Amin 1974). In the 1990s, another critique emerged, one more concerned with development agencies' power to control discourses and interpretations of development. Scholars and practitioners, such as Arturo Escobar (1995) and James Ferguson (1991) argued that development discourse reinforced Northern, modernist assumptions about development and undervalued the knowledge and experiences of the poor, often leading to tragically inappropriate policies and practices. They called for a more people-centered approach, one that recognized the importance of local knowledge, and encouraged participation and partnership in order to empower the poor so they could challenge the status quo.

This critique inspired an interest in participation and empowerment that was initially taken up by small-scale alternative development organizations with a focus on small-scale, grassroots initiatives. These organizations evolved a participatory empowerment approach that emphasized social transformation, especially in small-scale, impoverished and marginalized communities. This approach emphasized the local and often rejected state interventions as unfriendly and even destructive (Friedmann 1992). By the mid-1990s, however, some mainstream development agencies began to adopt the language of participation and empowerment as well. Perhaps affected by the limitations of structural adjustment policies, participatory empowerment advocates in mainstream institutions argued that this approach would improve economic performance and good governance without challenging the status quo (World Bank 1995).

These different interpretations of participation and empowerment have been reflected in debates about gender and development as well. The gender initiatives of alternative development agencies, such as Oxfam and many smaller NGOs, have generally emphasized the transformatory nature of women's empowerment efforts,

particularly in grassroots, small-scale initiatives. In contrast, more mainstream institutions have tended to regard women's empowerment as a means for enhancing their productivity and efficiency within established structures and practices (Moser 1993; Rowlands 1997).

The contradictory nature of both the interpretation and practice of participation and empowerment raises a number of questions, both for the practice of development in general and for women's development in particular. Why, for instance, is participation and empowerment so comfortable for such diverse and even conflicting development institutions? How can the same discourse be acceptable both to advocates of social transformation and those who favor reform within the status quo? Can such a slippery term be truly transformative? Or paradoxically, could reform in the name of empowerment hold the promise of more transformative action at some time in the future?

In order to take up this challenge, particularly from the vantagepoint of women, this chapter interrogates the practice and methodology of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). This set of methods and techniques emphasizes accessibility and practical, hand-on methods of enhancing participation and empowerment. It is popular with such disparate organizations as the World Bank, government development agencies, Oxfam, and many small Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs). Thus PRA offers an entry point for exploring the apparent contradiction in the widespread enthusiasm for this participatory empowerment approaches to development by institutions with such different and even conflicting agendas and goals. The chapter will investigate both the strengths and weaknesses of PRA and participatory empowerment, especially for women -- one of the groups most often left out of development decisions and activities and thus a group most in need of participation and empowerment. It also considers the possibility that the 'practical', experiential focus of PRA could benefit from a more explicit theoretical analysis, particularly the conceptual tools provided by political economy, with its focus on material structures, and poststructuralist debates about the discursive, relational and fluid nature of power and subjectivities.

Participatory Rural Appraisal: the new methodology

Participatory empowerment approaches to development have become a new mantra, promising solutions to the intensifying poverty and disempowerment in the South and to some extent in the North. The participatory methodology of Robert Chambers has found a particular niche in this approach to development. His participatory rural appraisal (PRA) methodology is currently the method of choice among a large number of development practitioners of various persuasions.

Chambers' methodology thus provides a lens into the world of participatory empowerment approaches used by both mainstream and alternative development practitioners, and an entry point for critically assessing this approach from a gender perspective (Guijt and Shah 1998; Mayoux 1995; White 1996).

Chambers has been developing his ideas and methodologies for the last fifteen years, and has had an enormous impact on the field of participatory development. His approach builds on the work of rural development specialists and the evolution of rapid rural appraisal (RRA), which emerged in the late 1970s. RRA called for greater attention to local people's knowledge, but still relied on the expert to obtain and organize this knowledge. PRA, which emerged in the late 1980s, and is still evolving, shifted the focus from gathering indigenous people's knowledge to encouraging and utilizing their analytical skills. Western development experts are no longer seen as in charge of the development process. Rather, they become facilitators, aiming to empower local peoples so they can analyze and solve problems in ways that lead to sustainable development practices. This approach criticizes the top-down approach to development favored by many Northern development practitioners, particularly more mainstream institutions. PRA advocates assert that the knowledge and analytical skills of the poor, whether formally educated or not, are crucial to both the definition and implementation of development in the South. PRA methods and techniques are designed to bring this knowledge to light, to integrate it into the development process and to empower those usually dismissed as marginal, voiceless and powerless (Chambers 1994b: 1254; 1997). As Chambers points out, 'PRA seeks to empower lowers—women, minorities, the poor, the weak and the vulnerable—to make power reversals real' (1997:106).

PRA is above all a methodology that emphasizes experiential innovation rather than theories and abstractions (Chambers 1994a: 1263). It has developed a cluster of very assessable easily understood techniques, usually with groups rather than individuals. For example, one group activity is called *do it yourself*, where the PRA team learns a local skill and then participates in the activity. This provides an opportunity for local people to demonstrate their knowledge, and upsets the usual hierarchy between the development 'experts' – i.e. those who know – and the local people, who supposedly have nothing to teach, but only need to learn from development 'experts'. *'They do it'* has local people interviewing, collecting and analyzing data. This undermines the assumption that only trained experts can do this work, and enhances local capabilities along these lines. *'Analysis of secondary*

sources’ encourages groups to evaluate information such as aerial photographs, maps of resource types, and other documents. It invites collective analysis and encourages all members of the community to express opinions and be ‘experts’, whether able to read or not. Participatory ‘*mapping and modeling*’ has local people draw maps and create models of social, demographic, health patterns and natural resources. The use of visual data gathering is regarded as particularly empowering ‘for those who are weak, disadvantaged and not alphabetically literate’ (Chambers 1997:149).

‘*Transect walks*’ require local people to walk with the PRA facilitators around an area identifying local resources. Again, this destabilizes the dichotomy between the development ‘expert’ and local ignorance, reminding everyone in a very public way that local knowledge is often superior for discovering the problems and solutions facing particular communities. ‘*Time lines, trends and change analysis*’ engage local folk in constructing chronologies of historical events in their communities, especially on subjects normally left out of historical discussions, such as ecology, education and the experiences of women and girls. These techniques both raise issues that often fail to enter serious discussions and reinforce the importance and depth of local knowledge. ‘*Well-being and wealth groups and rankings*’ request groups of local citizens to identify wealth rankings of groups or households, and to point to key indicators of well-being. This is done with models or cards for each household, so literacy is not required. This method also highlights local conceptions of power and status rather than definitions brought to the field by outside ‘experts’. The ‘*analysis of difference*’, explores contrasts, problems and preferences by gender, age, social group, wealth. Again it both reveals the rich variety of local knowledge and reinforces local knowledge and ‘knowers’ as key informants in the development process. ‘*Story telling*’ and ‘*presentations*’ of findings are also important, especially for groups, like women, who are generally denied opportunities for public presentations.

This cluster of methodologies (and others) are often used in particular sequences in order to maximize knowledge production and inclusiveness, especially among the most marginalized. Triangulation also encourages feedback by crosschecking sources of information at regular intervals. These methodologies are designed to facilitate participatory data collection, analysis, planning, implementation, report writing and monitoring in order to empower broad-based participation in development (Chambers 1994; 1994a). At the same time, PRA is designed ‘to

empower more than to extract, to start a process more than to gather data' (Chambers 1997:155).

Above all, PRA tries to bring the least privileged members of society into the development process. Influenced by a liberal notion of power, Chambers believes some people have *power over* others, but more due to past practice and institutional structures than the inherent selfishness of those in power. The goal for changing the powerful/powerless balance requires bringing the powerless into the circle of the powerful and encouraging dialogue. Inclusiveness is thus a central pillar of this approach. In order to include those with poor verbal skills, many techniques emphasize visual as well as verbal participation. While acknowledging the problematic potential of local power structures and practices, Chambers argues that giving voice, whether verbal or through visual inputs, and bringing the poor and better off together to discuss differences and identify problems will empower the disadvantaged and resolve conflicts. He admits that local knowledge could be used in counterproductive and even unsavory ways. It could enhance biased 'traditions' and reinforce local inequality, or possibly be appropriated by outside 'experts' for their own gain. Undeterred, Chambers counters with the argument that sensitive, highly trained PRA experts can limit such abuse by taking the time and care 'to find the poorest, to learn from them, and to empower them' (Chambers 1994b: 1441, 1445).

While Chambers openly worries about the current popularity of PRA, warning that formalism and practitioners with little understanding of PRA could make a mockery of its goals and intentions, he believes PRA techniques can for the most part overcome these dangers. As he points out, 'The challenge is so to introduce and use PRA that the weaker are identified and empowered and equity is served. Fortunately the tools available suit the task' (1997:217). Indeed, he has developed a number of methods for neutralizing development practitioners' preference for top-down development and for maintaining awareness and sensitivity to power imbalances between development experts and the people (Chambers 1994a: 1256-57). While calling for more research on the 'shortcomings and strengths' of PRA, most reports of PRA, according to Chambers, have been positive (Chambers 1994: 963).

Evaluating PRA, Participation and Empowerment: A Gender Perspective

Research on PRA has grown considerably since 1994, and we now have a better idea of both the successes and pitfalls of this methodology and approach. The

World Bank has formalized its interest in participatory approaches, and established a working group on the subject, although this is still hardly mainstream Bank policy (World Bank 1995). A 1990 study of 52 USAID projects discovered a clear correlation between participation and success (Weekes-Vagliani 1994: 31-32). More recent studies record numerous 'success' stories (Krishna, Uphoff and Esman 1997). A number of scholars have reported considerable enthusiasm for participatory techniques in villages, especially mapping and transect walks (Kelly and Armstrong 1996; Tiessen 1997). Visual mapping techniques are particularly popular as they enable participation by illiterate people, who are frequently women. The mapping can reveal the gendered character of daily life. In a Zimbabwean resettlement area,ⁱ for example, maps illustrated women's focus on the home, nearby fields and the community while men paid more attention to roads, fields and pastures. The maps then provided a talking point for discussions of environmental use (Goebel 1998; see also Shah 1998). Group activities are also quite popular, although attendance often drops over time, especially by women who have little free time (Mayoux 1995; Wieringa 1994). Participatory methods thus often improve information gathering at the community level, and reveal gender differences, if the facilitators are sufficiently attuned to gender concerns (Mosse 1994:498).

However, certain problems keep surfacing in reports from the field, and they raise some difficult questions about some of the methods and assumptions of this approach, particularly for women. While not wishing to undermine the very real contributions of PRA or the participatory empowerment approach, these issues need to be addressed. While many PRA advocates see such difficulties as teething problems that can be easily addressed by committed practitioners (Ngunjiri 1998), other are more gloomy about their implications. Francis Cleaver, for example, argues that 'despite significant claims to the contrary there is little evidence of the long-term effectiveness of participation in materially improving the conditions of the most vulnerable people or as a strategy for social change. While the evidence for efficiency receives some support on a small scale, the evidence regarding empowerment and sustainability is more partial, tenuous and reliant on assertions of the rightness of the approach and process rather than convincing proof of outcomes' (1999: 597). To address these concerns, we need to consider some of the problems encountered by PRA practitioners in the field.

One of the most significant limitations facing PRA practitioners comes from the methodology's focus on the local, which has encouraged facilitators to ignore or

underplay the impact of national and global power structures, discourses and practices. Yet, even the smallest village has links with people and countries beyond its borders (Cleaver 1999: 603-604). Moreover, most development projects have to deal with government structures and officials at one point or another and these dealings are often problematic. While there has been a move to bring participatory practices into government bureaucracies, most government officials have little understanding or empathy for PRA techniques, nor do they tend to believe the poor (especially women) should have a say in policy making or program development (Thompson 1995). This attitude is often reflected in laws. In Senegal, for example, Jesse Ribot discovered that the political administrative laws systematically disabled local representation, despite official 'support' for a community forestry project (1999: 26). Moreover, even sympathetic bureaucrats are frequently constrained by political and economic factors, such as structural adjustment programs. Official support for a project means little when the budgetary constraints of structural adjustment programs and economic malaise eliminate promised fiscal support (Mayoux 1998: 192-193). Moreover, male dominated political and economic structures often inhibit women's participation in crucial decision-making processes.

The participatory 'solution'—more broad-based representation on government boards and committees—has done little to challenge national and regional power structures. An Oxfam project in Burkina Faso, for example, placed members of peasant organizations on a government/NGO participatory planning board, but discovered this had no observable impact on the board's planning agendas (Ashby and Sperling 1995:757). Indeed, as Mayoux points out, 'the complex nature of gender subordination means that increasing women's participation may exacerbate rather than reconcile contradictions in the position of individual women' (1998: 181). The poor are rarely able to challenge national elites, and often require intervention by outside 'experts' who can insist on participatory methods and processes (interview, CIDA consultant, Masakar, Indonesia, 20 Sept 1997). This is particularly true when the representatives are women, as government officials often operate within a cultural context that undervalues women's opinions and contributions to public discussions (Mosse 1994: 498-99). Participation in bureaucratic structures by women, unless it addresses these rather intractable and often unrecognized assumptions, can do little to alter the gendered context in which participation occur (Mayoux 1995).

Moreover, despite the increasing popularity of participatory approaches, development practitioners often have deeply held reservations about the knowledge

and capacities of the poor, especially women. In Zambia, for example, despite strong commitment to participatory methods, the evaluation of an agricultural extension program revealed male-bias among the project leaders and difficulties dealing with gender issues (Frischmuth 1998). Goebel warns that many PRA 'experts' use the language and some of the methods of PRA 'without adequately acknowledging the complexity of social realities, or properly absorbing or practicing the intended notions of "participation"' (Goebel 1998: 279). Furthermore, some development practitioners believe in participatory development methods, but find it difficult to give up their authority over the poor. They want to empower the poor, but on their terms. This heavy-handed approach is particularly apt to happen with women, as most development practitioners come from cultures where women's subordination, and need for direction, is taken for granted (Rahnema 1990: 206-7). As Heaven Crawley cautions, the language of empowerment and participation 'creates an aura of moral superiority', which can protect practitioners of PRA from criticism and 'critical self-reflection about the truth of their claims' (1998:25).

Power structures exist at the local level as well, and these are much more complex and intractable than much PRA literature suggests. Indeed, even very poor, largely inaccessible villages have their own power brokers (Li 1999). Chamber's belief that these inequities can be transcended through persuasion, discussion and inclusion is frequently contradicted by reports from the field. Jesse Ribot, for example, discovered that local elites involved in participatory forestry projects in French West Africa had neither support from villagers nor an interest in participatory practices (1996). Local officials often reflect and support a gendered social context that dismisses women's contributions to public discussions. In such a context, simply placing women on project committees can do little to make them heard or to bring them into committee activities in a meaningful way (White 1996). Mayoux points out that 'statistics on co-operative and peasant movements indicate a continuing marginalization of women in mixed-sex participatory organizations' (1995:240). In Zimbabwean resettlement communities, for example, Goebel discovered that in general village meetings, 'women constantly had to be invited and re-invited for their views, while men regained control each time a woman had spoken' (1998:284). Moreover, women committee members sometimes support the status quo because it legitimates their superior position vis-a-vis other women. A Zimbabwean participatory ecology project, operating through Zimbabwe's CAMPFIRE program,ⁱⁱ for example, was initially captured by the local elites, and the presence of women did nothing to challenge their control. When the team leader disbanded the committee and set up a more representational one, the project

stalled for lack of support from the more powerful members of the community (Robinson 1996).

This example raises the issue of the relationship between the PRA team and the villages/region they are working in. Lack of familiarity with the community's power structure and cultural context may lead to problems such as those described above. The CAMPFIRE example mentioned above demonstrates the complexity of even the smallest communities, and the difficulties faced by the facilitators, particularly in the early stages of a project before community divisions are understood. But even when the fault lines in a community are discovered, they may be very difficult to deal with (Robinson 1996). Cleaver points out that sometimes a narrow focus on establishing participatory institutions can ignore existing systems of distribution and undermine already effective distribution mechanism (1999: 602). The specific historical experiences of communities may influence relations as well. In India, David Mosse encountered deeply entrenched suspicion about the motives of development practitioners. To his consternation, participatory methods did little to allay them (1994: 505). The informal and public nature of PRA techniques can alienate people accustomed to more formal patterns of communication. Moreover, non-directive, consultative approaches can be misconstrued, as can mapping, transect walks, and wealth measurements when they suggest all too familiar interventions by government officials. These practices, when combined with ignorance of the local and national power structures, can undermine the potential for participatory work (Mosse 1994: 506-7).

The collection of local knowledge and the fostering of local analytical and planning skills are a rather more complicated process than anticipated by PRA methodologies as well. Knowledge is not something that just exists out there, ready to be discovered and used. It is embedded in social contexts, exerted in relations of power and attached to different power positions (Scoones and Thompson 1993: 2). Control over knowledge is often an essential element in local power relations and structures. It reinforces local hierarchies, and is often highly gendered. Participatory methods, with their stress on inclusiveness and voice, threaten this hierarchy of control over knowledge. As we have seen, in the Zimbabwean resettlement areas, women's voices were repeatedly ignored or silenced. This is a common report from the field around the world (Jackson 1997; Rasavi 1998). Yet the consequences of this pattern are not always easy to assess. Cleaver discovered that while few women attended meetings in a Tanzanian water use project, they spoke for the larger community of women while men spoke only for themselves

(1998: 602). Clearly, the collection of knowledge is not a purely technical business; it is deeply embedded in power structures and struggles and affected by material and cultural factors. This is particularly true in regions where development activities are well established and community leaders have learned the importance of presenting foreigners (or government bureaucrats) with the 'right' kind of information. The public nature of these transactions makes it all the more plausible that certain knowledges and groups will be silenced (or forced to speak), by those leaders most able to control community discourse. The groups most apt to be silenced, or pushed into public disclosures, are the poor and women (Mosse 1994: 508-9).

Ironically, giving people voice does not always empower the poor, especially women. Control over knowledge, even through silence, can be an essential and empowering survival strategy for marginalized people (Mahoney 1996; Suski 1997). For example, members of secret societies gain power by their ability to decide when to speak, to whom and about what. The power associated with gossip and information, the ability to decide when, where and with whom it will be shared reminds us that giving voice to women (or men) especially in public arenas is not always empowering (Gal 1991). For instance, self-control and careful speech are seen as a sign of honor and power among the Bedouin (Abu-Lughod 1999: 90-93). In Java, women's ability to control their speech and public behavior is equated with empowerment. To speak loudly, publicly and carelessly is a sign of loss of respect and power (Brenner 1998). The public group discussions so central to PRA methods may thus be both disempowering and threatening for the more marginalized members of a community—often women.

Moreover, PRA activities do not always fit women's schedules or agendas. Mosse discovered that projects in India often assumed women would be available at central locations (away from fields and home) for lengthy periods of time. These requirements conflicted with women's work structures and limited women's participation in project activities. Collective activities often took place in spaces that were forbidden to women. Yet, their lack participation was often explained as 'natural' and so unremarkable. Indeed, at one project, women's presence at activities caused comments, but their absence went unnoticed (1994: 512). Mapping and transect walks are often seen as men's work. The emphasis on spatial mapping in a Sierra Leone project, for example, did not fit women's concerns—they argued that 'the changes we need cannot be drawn'. Gender issues such as relations between men and women, violence against women, were of no interest to men, and so did not get on the agenda (Welbourn 1996). Moreover, women do not all have the same interests. Social and economic hierarchies among women can

undermine cooperation. Internalized notions of femininity and propriety may inhibit open discussions as well. Many women are reluctant to discuss sensitive issues like domestic violence or domestic quarrels in public fora. Indeed, consensus among women is highly problematic; many issues divide them (Mayoux 1995: 242-45). Sharing thoughts and dreams will not necessarily overcome these divisions, despite the best hopes of PRA supporters

The need for specific skills training is also rarely discussed in the PRA literature. Yet we know women, especially poor women, often need specific skills if they are going to challenge existing stereotypes about their inability to plan and monitor activities. While gender planning has become more accepted in the literature on development planning (Kabeer 1994; Moser 1993), this literature is generally aimed at Northern experts or Southern experts trained in the North. Participatory approaches call for full participation in all phases of development projects, but they often underestimate the skills needed for such participation, especially report writing and evaluation—skills which poor women rarely have. Participatory projects, like all development projects, must submit frequent reports and budgets. (Wieringa 1994). As a child-focused NGO in Uganda, Red Barnet, discovered, participatory projects require skill building and locally designed methodologies, and the time, determination and knowledge to put them in place (Guijt, Kisadha and Mukasa 1998). Daunting as these requirements are for local people, they have been made more difficult by the current emphasis on results based management (RBM) While designed to ensure project effectiveness, RBM creates obstacles for people who are supposedly key participants in participatory projects, whether among the rural or the urban poor. It forces project managers to employ specialists capable of obtaining base line data and measuring project effectiveness against this data. This practice runs counter to more participatory development practices, as it requires highly skilled experts on indicators, the ability to handle figures and both numeracy and literacy. Thus, while the language of participation and empowerment spreads, some of the practices of development on the ground undermine the possibility for participatory empowerment. Poor people are left outside the discussions; measurement and evaluations are once again the purview of the development ‘expert’ rather than local people, and women, with their lack of skills, are left outside the loop. This is a serious impediment to wholehearted, effective participation.

Conclusion

This overview of participatory empowerment approaches to development in Africa and elsewhere, especially the use of PRA, is not exhaustive. The successes of participatory empowerment approaches are undoubted, and they are important. However, the failures are also apparent and may go some way to explaining why these concepts and practices can be comfortably advocated by what appear to be conflicting perspectives on development. Mainstream development agencies have been committed to the market and reduction of the state, and any policies that shift state functions onto society without upsetting the status quo fit that mandate. Participatory empowerment approaches, with their emphasis on the local and their tendency to ignore larger political and economic structures, actually do little to challenge national power structures. It is no wonder that participation, as Rahnema (1990) points out, is no longer perceived as a threat.

This rather cynical assessment should not lead us to underestimate the very real importance of participatory empowerment approaches. Bringing the marginalized and the poor into discussions, as well as encouraging and facilitating local knowledge and analytical skills is crucial to development both as an economic activity and as a personal and societal goal. However, the above research clearly cautions against a too ready equation between participation and either individual or group empowerment. Gender inequalities, in particular, are deeply embedded in cultural as well as material patterns. Changing gender hierarchies and assumptions requires more than simply giving voice to women or including them in development activities. Indeed, many other inequalities are also highly resistant to change. If PRA is going to be more effective, we need to think new ways about participation and empowerment, particularly for women. This will require the use of theoretical tools, as well as field experience, to design more effective methods and techniques to enhance women's ability and commitment to transform (or at least challenge) the cultural and material practices that reinforce gender inequalities.

This rather daunting task will require melding theory with praxis in ways that address fundamental impediments to participation and empowerment while maintaining the accessibility and practicality of PRA techniques and methodologies. The challenge, it seems to me, is to develop a more nuanced and sophisticated analysis of participation, power and empowerment from a gendered perspective. This will require a thorough analysis of the way global and national power structures affect local contexts, as well as an understanding of the

complexities and resilience of local power structures and relations. Power, with its discursive as well as material aspects, must be reconsidered as well. Moreover, the literature on multiple identities and subjectivities has much to tell us about the complex ways people, including women, seek to ensure their well being in a changing world.

Participatory empowerment techniques will have to pay more attention to the way national and global power structures constrain and define the possibilities for change at the local level. Structural adjustment programs, for example, have often hampered local and national development efforts. The participatory approach needs to develop techniques for analyzing the way global and national political and economic structures and practices intersect with and affect local power structures. This will require more explicit methods for identifying these structures and their relationships with local communities. Interviews with key elites will be necessary, and can only rarely be fully participatory. However, the increasingly globalized world we live in leaves no doubt that these elements must be incorporated into our analysis (Mittelman 1997). Moreover, the gendered character of these political and economic structures requires specific attention in order to understand their differential impact on the sexes (Peterson and Runyan 1993; Staudt 1990). This may seem like it is reintroducing the 'expert' and the hierarchies between 'expert' and those who do not 'know'. If carried out with due humility towards 'expert' knowledge and a belief in the importance of local knowledge, this need not happen.

Local power structures require more explicit analysis as well. One of the strengths of the participatory empowerment approach to development has been its focus on the local and its belief that even the poorest communities can understand and solve their own developmental problems. However, divisions are often ignored or underplayed by PRA advocates, who often try to avoid conflict, on the assumption that divisions can be overcome by full and frank discussion among all parties. This rather liberal, one might even say romantic, belief in democratic processes underestimates the intractable nature of many local economic and political structures. Moreover, sensitivity to existing social arrangements has often led to the uncritical acceptance of traditional inequities, especially those that relegate gender relations to the private realm, outside economic and political structures and thus to challenges to the status quo (Fals Borda and Rahman 1991; Guijt and Shah 1998). The wealth and status rankings, and the time line techniques of PRA reveal the differential access to power and resources of men and women, but they offer little explanation for how these differences come about. To understand the forces at play,

we need a more detailed exploration of the relationship between gender and local political and economic structures. We need to know how women and men participate in these structures, whether some women are able to use them to their advantage, while others are silenced and marginalized. The conceptual tools of materialist feminists (Hennessy 1993) and gender and development scholars such as Kabeer (1994) and Moser (1993) offer some insights for this endeavor, particularly the emphasis on the gendered character of material and discursive forces and their role in maintaining gender hierarchies.

However, a focus on the material elements of power is not sufficient by itself. We need to understand the way belief systems and cultural practices legitimize and reinforce material structures. The link between language/ knowledge and power is increasingly recognized as a central factor in development activities, particularly the power of development practitioners to define developmental ‘problems’ and ‘solutions’ (Crush 1995; Escobar 1995; Marchand and Parpart 1995). PRA techniques pick up on this critique with their rejection of top-down development practices and their desire to bring the marginalized into development discussions and plans. This is an important first step, but it is based on the assumption that giving voice to the voiceless will solve power inequities. Yet we know that the marginalized, especially women, can speak but not be heard. Moreover, speaking is not always a source of power. It can disempower if it removes the ability to control the dissemination of knowledge. To address these issues, PRA techniques need a much more sophisticated analysis of voice, and of the link between language/knowledge and power (Mahoney 1996; Suski 1997). This is particularly true in matters of gender, which are deeply embedded in the unconscious, and often presented as natural, unchanging cultural practices and symbols.

PRA methodology would also benefit from a more explicit integration of Foucauldian and feminist thinking on power (Foucault 1991). This thinking rejects the notion that power only happens when one has *power over* people, resources and institutions. This undergirds much of the PRA approach, with its emphasis on inclusion, on bringing the powerless into the circle of power. Many feminists argue that power has to be understood in more complex ways (Deveaux 1996), Rowlands 1997, Sawicki 1996). It includes expanded self-understanding, or *power within*. But this kind of power does not inevitably lead to societal or even individual challenges to the status quo. For that, PRA will have to design methods that can help women to see that their lives will only improve with collective action, based on *power with* others. Even more importantly, collective action will not be effective unless it

considers the structural and cultural contexts in which it takes place. Participatory methods can surely be turned to this challenge for its emphasis on participation leads readily to collective action. But action, the *power to* transform people's lives, requires a realistic assessment of material, institutional and cultural impediments to challenges to the status quo and strategic plans for overcoming these barriers.

Finally, the current interest in identity politics and shifting and multiple subjectivities offers some insights into the analysis of individual behavior, and thus to empowerment (Grewal and Kaplan 1994; Sawicki 1996). PRA techniques are sensitive to the complexity of local conditions and the need to bring the marginalized into the center. But they fail to theorize the subject. Individuals are generally assumed to play a particular role in the community, when in fact, they may play several, sometimes conflicting roles. These conflicts can offer entry points for otherwise unexpected alliances. For example, women from the wealthier groups in a community may align more with their class than their sex, thus having little empathy for their poorer sisters. But some women from this class may resent their treatment as women and could thus conceivably align themselves with poor women over certain gender issues. PRA techniques, with their multiple data sets, have the potential to reveal such complexities, but to do so, they must move beyond description to analysis—something that requires attention to theory as well as technique.

These rather preliminary ruminations on PRA and participatory empowerment approaches and methodologies are of necessity more an opening salvo for future discussions than a set of prescriptions. I argue that PRA techniques, particularly as outlined by Robert Chambers, and much of the writing on participatory empowerment, are under-theorized, especially in relation to power. They too readily assume participation can overcome deeply embedded material and cultural practices that legitimate and maintain social inequities. Theoretical critiques by scholars such as Scoones and Thompson (1993) and others have not been sufficiently incorporated into discussions of PRA. Indeed, Chambers seems to believe that theorizing is for scholars, but it is for the most part a waste of time for practitioners. He continues to emphasize the accessible and practical character of PRA (1997). I agree that the goals of PRA and participatory empowerment are laudable and important, particularly their accessibility for the poor and their focus on grassroots, locally constructed understandings and solutions to development problems. While often not explicitly designed to address gender issues (Guijt and

Shah 1998), they have contributed to our understanding of grassroots women's daily experiences.

However, if these techniques are going to effectively challenge established power divisions, especially along gender lines, they will have to incorporate more nuanced understandings of power, particularly the connection between power, voice/silence and gender, as well as the material and structural forces at play. The challenge is to develop techniques that retain the accessibility and practicality of PRA, yet incorporate the insights of current thinking on the material and discursive nature of power. This will take time, effort and considerable experimentation. Some important efforts in this direction have been taking place (Fals Borda and Rahman 1991; Jackson 1997; Goetz 1995; Guijt and Shah 1998; Lennie 1999; Rowlands 1997). More will be needed. However, one thing is clear. If PRA and participatory empowerment approaches do succeed in melding theory and practice in ways that successfully destabilize established power structures, they will certainly no longer be the darling of those members of the development enterprise who want to reform rather than transform the world.

ⁱ The resettlement scheme in Zimbabwe was designed to provide land for African peasants -- a key demand of the liberation war. After independence in 1980, the government set up resettlement schemes on unused or abandoned land. The program has been a key element in the government's rhetorical commitment to land redistribution although in practice the transfer of land to landless peasants has been depressingly slow.

ⁱⁱ The CAMPFIRE (Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources) program in Zimbabwe focuses on communal management of resources. It focuses on conservation through community based resource management, decentralization, and institution building, with due attention to ethnicity and gender. Originally focused on wildlife, CAMPFIRE projects now involve forestry and mining resources as well. Robinson was involved in the Sunungukai Tourism Project, in Mashonaland Central, which was designed to enhance the community's ability to use its natural resources through tourism. The project used PRA methods. It was CAMPFIRE's first attempt to develop non-consumptive tourism, with cultural interaction as a central focus.

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